



# F-35 Lightning II Program

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## LFE INCLUDES F-35 FOR THE FIRST TIME

**LUKE AIR FORCE BASE, Arizona --** After eight months of intense training, the students of the 310th and 309th Fighter Squadron Basic F-16 Fighting Falcon Course were put to their final test as they joined forces with the F-35 and a multitude of other platforms during their capstone Large Force Exercises April 18-29, at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona.

Students integrated with different platforms, some from different bases, all fighting in the same air space at once. They faced up to eight simulated enemy aircraft and utilized air-to-air and air-to-surface tactics. These capstone missions ensure students are ready for their future operational tours.

"These LFEs mark the culmination of eight months of training for the B-Course students," said Lt. Col. William McKibban, 309th FS commander. "Our weapons officers plan for months to make it as realistic as possible with the resources we have available. Every F-16 instructor pilot realizes that, within months, these students will likely be using their skills in operational environments. There is no other option but for each of them to be ready for those responsibilities."



F-16s and F-35s from the 56th Fighter Wing fly side by side during a large force exercise April 18-29 at Luke Air Force Base, Arizona. The LFE is the culmination of eight months of training integrating different platforms from different bases utilizing air to air and air to surface tactics.

The students were tasked with creating and then executing dynamic and multifaceted mission plans.

"We were presented with very complex problems and with the help of our mission commanders, we were able come up with really good solutions then go out and execute them," said 1st Lt. Robert Kouwe, 310th FS B-Course student. "We planned our mission the day prior to flying the LFE. We had to answer questions like; how do we get a C-17 into a drop zone so they can drop off supplies for a simulated special forces team? Learning how to dynamically solve this problem prepares us for what we'll actually be doing while deployed."

This marks the first time at Luke that the F-35 Lightning II has been fully integrated into the LFEs, allowing students to utilize the fighter's unique and extensive capabilities.

"Our strength here at Luke is that we have 4th generation and 5th generation assets at the same base, so we can truly train how we fight," said Lt. Col. Aaron Jelinek, 61st FS director of operations. "We've been developing this platform and getting more and more capable as we go on. We were able to contribute to the fight over the past two weeks and allow, not only the students, but also instructors to see what this platform is currently capable of right here, right now."

This exercise also allowed students to see first-hand how the F-35 makes solving these dynamic challenges easier.

"The F-35 compliments us with a whole new capability," Kouwe said. "It adds so much situational awareness and the low observability is extremely good."

One of the F-35 pilots involved in the exercise spent the first part of his career mastering the F-16. He now gets to fly next to his old jet and share the capabilities of his new fighter.

"We're able to know what's going on and then pass that information to the F-16s. We provide a bigger picture, more situational awareness, while also utilizing unprecedented stealth capabilities," said Maj. Joseph Walker, 62nd FS B-Flight commander "We're able to go places and take out threats the F-16 traditionally can't or faces a higher risk of failure. We're here to utilize the F-35's strengths while enhancing the F-16's strengths by working together."

Some of the F-16 students had a chance to learn what it's like to execute an LFE with and without the F-35.

"I flew one day with the F-35s and one day without them and it really showed me the benefits of having them with us," Kouwe said. "It gave me confidence knowing that it wasn't just up to us to take care of ourselves, but that we had them watching our backs."

The LFE provided students a realistic training environment that not only showed them what their wingmen in other platforms are capable of but also how to communicate and quickly problem solve when things don't go according to plan.

"Putting all these moving pieces together is something you can talk about all day but until you go and do it and see what can go wrong and then follow up with a solution, there's no other way to simulate it but to actually practice it," Kouwe said. "All pilots think their platform is the best but when you put all the different communities into a mission planning room it forces you to take a step back and admit your limitations and say where and why we need the other platforms."

The LFE furthered the student's development and completed their B-Course training, but it also presented another milestone for the F-35 program at Luke.

"It's a big deal for us," Jelinek said. "Every time we get to go integrate and show off our capabilities, both air-to-air and air-to-ground, it really opens eyes. Everyone sees it on the ramp and they might think it looks pretty cool but it's a whole new story when they're up in the air experiencing what this capability brings."

The first B-Course F-35 student was announced in March and soon the F-35 program will be expanding its training syllabus.

"We've made leaps and bounds since the beginning of the year," said Capt. Ian Osterreicher, 61st FS chief of scheduling. "We're going to see our syllabus ramp up and we'll be starting to do our own LFEs and next time, we'll be asking the F-16s to support us."

Even with all the milestones and advancements this is just the start for the things to come at Luke and the F-35 program.

"We only have a squadron and a half training fighter pilots," Jelinek said. "Eventually, we're going to have 144 F-35s. If you look out on the ramp and multiply what we have right now by four, that's the capability we're going to have to train tomorrow's fighters."

This fall, Hill AFB, Utah, is going to declare initial operating capability. The extensive training here at Luke, to include integration exercises like LFEs, allows Hill to be ready for this next step.

"We fly more sorties in the 61st FS than any other Air Force fighter squadron," Jelinek said. "With the number of hours we put on these jets, the number of sorties we turn per week, we're able to pass valuable lessons learned to these other bases. We're able to pass any findings we have on how the F-35 performs to operational testers, developmental testers and, most importantly, back to Hill to get them ready for IOC."